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S E C R E T SECTION 01 OF 03 MANAMA 000347

SIPDIS

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [KIRF](#) [BA](#)

SUBJECT: GOB REACTS TO OUTWARD SIGNS OF SHIA ACTIVISM
DURING ASHURA OBSERVANCES

REF: A. MANAMA 344

[B](#). MANAMA 281

[C](#). MANAMA 273

[D](#). MANAMA 270

Classified by Ambassador William T. Monroe for reasons 1.4
(b) and (d).

Summary

[1](#)1. (C) The GOB has launched a public and private campaign complaining of Iranian interference in Bahraini affairs and attempts to sow sectarianism in Bahrain. Interior Minister Shaikh Rashed said publicly that some people spread hate messages during mid-February Shia Ashura celebrations by chanting slogans and hanging posters inciting divisions within Bahraini society. Bahrain is the only GCC country that permits widespread public Ashura processions. The means of celebrating the holiday in Bahrain varied depending on the participants' school of thought, but those who cut themselves are a very small minority in the country's Shia community. The processions allow the Shia to push the envelope of public expression, and this year in Bahrain the faithful posted photographs of Khomeini, Khamenei, and even Hizballah SecGen Nasrallah in greater number and size than in previous years. The Bahraini government could well be right that Iran is fomenting activism in the Shia community, but another source of Shia empowerment and public confidence is undoubtedly the Shia success in Iraq's elections. The GOB encourages the participation of all sectors of society in its political system, but it may not be ready to deal with an increasingly assertive Shia population. End Summary.

Beware the Iranian Hand

[1](#)2. (S) Echoing public statements by King Hamad February 26 (Ref C) and Foreign Minister Shaikh Mohammed and Minister of State for Foreign Affairs Abdul Ghaffar's private comments to the Ambassador (Refs A, D), Prime Minister Shaikh Khalifa March 6 publicly vowed to crack down on lawbreakers who threaten national unity. He was reacting to Minister of Interior Shaikh Rashed's separate briefings for the Cabinet and members of Parliament over "violations committed during Ashura," saying the government will not tolerate sectarian acts. Shaikh Rashed said some people spread hate messages during Ashura by chanting slogans and hanging posters calling for divisions within Bahraini society. The Cabinet issued a statement condemning acts that harm the "one-family spirit" reinforced by the King's reform program. Shaikh Mohammed and Abdul Ghaffar told the Ambassador that during Ashura, pictures of Khomeini and Khamenei proliferated in Manama and Shia villages (more and larger than usual, they said). Even more worrisome, said Abdul Ghaffar, were camps set up offering ideological training to youth. Calling these camps "very dangerous," he said that Bahraini authorities found in the camps Hizballah logos as well as numerous American and Israeli flags drawn on the ground for people to stomp on. Shaikh Mohammed told the Ambassador that the government reacted strongly this time, including with a now-public protest to the Iranian Ambassador, to nip in the bud this activity and ensure that it does not become more pronounced during future Ashuras.

Long Tradition of Ashura Observances

[1](#)3. (SBU) The Shia-observed holiday of Ashura, commemorating the killing of the Prophet Mohammed's grandson Hussein in Karbala, runs for the first ten days of the Islamic month of Moharram. The holiday reaches its peak on the 9th and 10th of Moharram, coinciding with February 18-19 this year. With some 70 percent of its population Shia Muslim, Bahrain is the only GCC country that permits widespread public Ashura celebrations. Bahrain's Shia are proud of their unique status in the region: one contact boasted that the Shia had carried out their traditions for centuries before the ruling (Sunni) Al Khalifa family came to the island.

[1](#)4. (SBU) Ashura is best known for images of the faithful marching in processions covered in blood from self-inflicted

sword and knife cuts on their heads and backs (called "haidar" in Arabic), symbolizing the suffering of Hussein. While this striking and gruesome scene was visible in downtown Manama, particularly on the morning of the 10th of Moharram (February 19), Bahraini Shia note that there is much more to the holiday than blood-letting. They note that this year in particular, Shia assembly halls ("ma'tams") in both the capital and smaller towns and villages organized regular lectures on the events and personalities surrounding Ashura, "passion plays" portraying the suffering of Hussein, blood drives to support local hospitals, and papier-mache reproductions of Hussein's martyrdom reminiscent of Christmas nativity scenes. On a vacant lot across the street from the landmark American Mission Hospital in downtown Manama, Shia clerics, at least one of Iranian origin, gave lectures in fluent English to interested foreigners.

Variety Among Rituals of Procession Participants

15. (SBU) Although less bloody, the Ashura processions of the evening of the 9th of Moharram, February 18, were nonetheless remarkable for their size, variety, and religious fervor. With the exception of a group of about 10 young men who struck their backs with swords and knives, the many thousands who marched did not cut themselves. Organized by ma'tams, most groups (men-only) walked in rows accompanied by riderless horses, preachers broadcasting chants via mobile speaker systems, drums, banners, and the occasional mock coffin. One group was accompanied by a marching band whose members wore identical black satin uniforms with gold sashes, similar to the spectacle of a New Orleans Dixieland jazz funeral procession.

16. (SBU) The ma'tams are identified by their location in a particular area of Bahrain or by the ethnic origin of the members. There are ma'tams for Shia of Bahraini origin, called "Baharna;" of Persian origin but with Bahraini citizenship, called "Ajaam" (some of these families have been in Bahrain for generations but are considered to be Persians); guest workers from the sub-continent, mostly Pakistanis; and Saudis from the Eastern Province who can practice their faith in relative freedom. Each of the groups performs a particular style of self-flagellation in unison. Many tap their chests gently with their right hands; others have complex, dance-like rhythmic movements resulting in a hard chest smash with both hands; other groups swat their backs with strands of chain-link attached to wooden handles. There is some measure of "having fun" and teenage testosterone-fueled one-upmanship in the enthusiasm some of the faithful demonstrate. Small groups of what appear to be brothers, cousins, and best friends urge each other on to ever higher frenzies of shouting, praying, and pounding.

17. (SBU) The route of the procession is lined with stalls organized by ma'tams, distributing hot and cold drinks and food free of charge to any and all present, including (clearly non-Bahraini) Emboffs. Volunteers at the stalls went out of their way to make foreigners feel welcome, personally delivering food and drink to those standing in the immediate area. They also walked with participants in the processions for short distances, plying them with refreshments like spectators passing drinks to marathon runners. Many women and children watch the processions from the sides of the street or from windows, adding to the almost carnival-like atmosphere.

Public Displays of Shia Luminaries

18. (SBU) There were numerous photographs, including some very large ones, of Khomeini and Khamenei along the procession route in central Manama. Pasted on the walls were posters featuring the two Iranians as well as Hizballah SecGen Nasrallah. Although Emboffs did not see any Hizballah flags, other spectators did. Some posters protested Article 56 of Bahrain's 2002 constitution, which grants a general amnesty to, among others, security forces personnel accused by Shia of torturing and killing detainees during strife in the mid-1990's. These posters displayed photos of the bodies of those killed in clashes with security forces and while in detention. A few participants in the processions wore badges saying "Death to America" and "Death to Israel" in Farsi.

Shirazis at the Extreme

19. (C) According to Shia contacts, the various methods of commemorating the death of Hussein reflect different schools of thought in the Shia community. Bahrain's Shia follow many different trends within the Shia sect, including those of Khomeini/Khamenei, Al Khoei, Fadlallah, Sistani, and Shirazi. In the late 1980's, Khomeini issued a fatwa saying that

performing haidar, the blood-letting, is "haram," or religiously unacceptable. He recommended that Shia donate blood instead. The large majority of Bahrain's Shia still follow this instruction. However, just two years ago, Grand Ayatollah Mohammed Shirazi, the (now deceased) leader of the more radical Shirazi movement, disagreed and issued a fatwa saying that haidar is religiously acceptable. His fatwa coincided with the greater political openness in Bahrain initiated by the King's reform policies, and adherents of the Shirazi philosophy moved quickly to resume this bloody practice, which many non-Shirazi Shia view with disgust.

10. (C) The Al Qassab ma'tam in downtown Manama is the center for Shirazis in Bahrain. It is run by the Al Alawi family. Minister of Labor and former exiled dissident Majid Al Alawi is from the same family, but he is not close to the branch involved in the Al Qassab ma'tam. Our contacts say that almost all the men performing haidar in the Ashura processions are members of this ma'tam. One contact claimed that many of the Saudi Shia who come to Bahrain for the holidays are members of the Shirazi movement and also cut themselves in the processions.

Comment

11. (C) Bahrain's leadership is becoming increasingly nervous about and sensitive to overt signs of Shia activism. The government is particularly incensed with obvious displays of deference to non-Bahraini religious leaders, many of whom the GOB considers to be politicians more than they are clerics (i.e., Khamenei and Nasrallah). While it is Bahraini policy to encourage full participation in the political system by all sectors of society, the leadership has not yet developed a policy to deal with the potential full empowerment and possible political success of the Shia community. The source of increased Shia activism inside Bahrain could be due to Iranian interference, as the government claims. However, another likely source is the impact on Shia identity and confidence brought on by the sweeping Shia electoral victory in Iraq. The GOB wants Shias to participate in the system, but it may not yet be comfortable with an increasingly assertive community. Therefore, the government could be laying down markers -- complaining of Iranian meddling, arresting the administrators of an opposition website (Ref B), calling for national unity and threatening those who promote sectarianism -- that it will permit a Shia renaissance to go only so far.

12. (U) Baghdad minimize considered.

MONROE